
Mark LEVINE, *Heavy Metal Islam: Rock, Resistance, and the Struggle for the Soul of Islam*

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L'auteur & les Éd. Mélanie Seteun

Mark LeVine, *Heavy Metal Islam: Rock, Resistance, and the Struggle for the Soul of Islam*. New York, Three Rivers Press, 2008.

FEW PEOPLE COULD carry out such a study as this. Among negotiating the different countries, the different practices of Islam, the languages, finding and interviewing the musicians, and not getting into serious trouble with the local governments along the way, Mark LeVine has written a book that few could indeed compose. LeVine's *Heavy Metal Islam* is a valuable insiders guide to metal in the Muslim world, representing what I wish would happen in more studies of music. Namely, an in-depth engagement with the topic coupled with a reader-friendly presentation and tone. You don't need a PhD to read *Heavy Metal Islam*, but even if you've got one, there is plenty in here to think about.

The book takes us on a Westerly-bound journey through the Middle East and North Africa, MENA. We start in Morocco and venture to Egypt, Israel/Palestine, Lebanon, Iran, and finally Pakistan. LeVine's primary material for this voyage is interviews he conducted in the field, backed by sometimes-thin bibliography. This first-person account of metal in the Muslim world over the last decade or so is a valuable contribution to anyone interested in metal and MENA socio-politics.

What is great about *Heavy Metal Islam*? LeVine provides readers with an edgy, firsthand look inside the metal world of Islam. At times, his descriptions of events, like "Boulevard" in Morocco, are so skillfully presented that it made me want to go and participate in the scene. We get a detailed understanding of the challenges facing metal musicians in their respective Muslim countries and how the widely varying societies have dealt with this recent incursion of metal music.

The chapters on Iran and Pakistan are especially welcome as many of us are even less familiar with the metal scenes, or general music scenes, in these countries than in the Arabic-speaking world.

I particularly enjoyed the interviews and hearing what musicians and fans had to say about the music. It is quite compelling to hear their stories as well as to feel like we are accompanying LeVine on his metal adventures throughout the region. But this is not just story-time with Mark or metal journalism in politically tense and often unstable geographies. LeVine is insightfully able to place the individuals, the bands, and the scenes all within the broader socio-political contexts that often shape them. This is perhaps the greatest strength of *Heavy Metal Islam*. LeVine understands the politics of the region, the metal of the region, and weaves the two together into a thoughtful tapestry.

Moreover, the book introduces a lot of music. Fans will like bouncing around LeVine's links to the bands. Although be warned, not all of it is good metal, but I'll let the reader decide. The book concludes with an Epilogue in which LeVine provides a sober assessment of metal's ability to forge social and political change and how metal may play a role in MENA's future.

But this also is a review, so here are my gripes. At times, it feels like he is trying to make a case for metal as rap and hip-hop appear to have much wider fan bases in MENA. In the countries involved in the "Arab Spring," rap and hip-hop were *far* more often the voices of defiance, the voices that gave people, "the courage to say to oppressive societies and repressive regimes, 'Fuck you, I won't do what you tell me,' as a famous Rage Against

the Machine song of that title put it.” (p. 11–12) Not to nit pick, but the song lyrics come from the Rage song, “Killing in the Name Of,” not a “song of that title.”

While I’m digressing, there are also other slips of detail. LeVine speaks of “even tri-tone modulations” in Black Sabbath tunes (p. 9), but I’m not aware of any that truly have this. If LeVine is referring to the song “Black Sabbath,” the tri-tone relationship might be considered a harmonic progression (alternatively, one could hear it as being part of the slow, dirge-like riff); regardless, it isn’t a modulation. Such slips appear from time-to-time, but I will refrain from taking him too much to task on these details—such a practice is fashionable and ultimately amounts to academic squabbling, when in truth, it makes little difference to the main point.

Picking up on rap and hip-hop, LeVine draws important connections between rap, hip-hop, and metal but never goes out of his way to talk about their many important differences, and why rap and hip-hop have been, and are, the chosen voices for “resistance” more so than metal. The truth is, he spends a lot of time talking about rap and hip-hop and at times, such as when reading the Israel/Palestine chapter, I was left wondering, “wait a second, isn’t this a book on metal?” So the question becomes, why? One of the reasons is that metal was never an explicitly political genre. Its reception history may include political components

(though which genre doesn’t?) but political expression was never a primary lyrical topic. It shows at times, for sure, but did it drive the scene? No. For rap and hip-hop, even for punk, one could say that it did.

Metal is less about politics and political change, and more about expressing emotion in a society that tells young men that emotion is a feminine virtue (read: men shouldn’t display it). As one student in Melissa Cross’s *The Zen of Screaming 2*, an instruction video for metal vocalists, says, “look at me feel.” Perhaps even more than the ideas of power and empowerment, the longstanding socio-cultural concepts that held the various and competing metal subgenres together, metal is about emotion. It may be a generalization, but there is substance to the idea that most metal fans are attracted to the sounds/timbres of the music. While many rap and hip-hop fans are also drawn to the beats and sounds as well, the lyrics play a much more important role in that music, perhaps partly explaining why it is a better agent for social change.

All that said, *Heavy Metal Islam* is a terrific book. It is a fun, intelligent read and the result of some truly outstanding fieldwork. Readers will find LeVine’s points insightful, accessible, and enjoy getting to know the metal of the Muslim world.

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